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SUBJECT: MANNING CRITICIZES USG FOR IGNORING CARIBBEAN

Classified By: Classified By: DCM Eugene P. Sweeney for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) GOTT Prime Minister Patrick Manning yesterday criticized the USG for ignoring the Caribbean region in general and its security, counter narcotics and trade needs in particular. Speaking at a September 5 luncheon before an audience largely comprising energy industry executives and members of the diplomatic corps, including Ambassador Austin, Manning said: &Washington has been studiously ignoring the Caribbean and ignoring the requirements of Trinidad and Tobago. He referred specifically to the Third Border Initiative which, he said, &has been so eloquently articulated in Washington but &has not gotten off the mark in any significant way.

¶2. (U) Manning did not end there. He charged that, ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US Government has focused almost exclusively on counter-terrorism security. While conceding that the emphasis on the war against terror is understandable, Manning said this preoccupation has resulted in the neglect on the war against drug trafficking which has &gone to the back burner. Referring to the continued use of the Caribbean region as a trans-shipment point for drugs leaving the South American mainland on their way north, Manning said T&T has offered to patrol the eastern Caribbean but cannot afford to finance the operation. He emphasized that what is at stake is not only Caribbean security but &is as much the security of the US...the offer remains on the table.

¶3. (U) Finally, Manning raised the issue of US/T&T trade. Perhaps because he was addressing representatives of T&T energy industry, Manning implied that T&T,s reliance on the US as the almost exclusive destination for its LNG exports has been misplaced, particularly since he alleged that the price the US has been paying, apart from shipments to the Boston area, for T&T,s LNG has not been as high as is otherwise available on the market. He said: &we are going to have to decide whether we wish to place all our eggs in one basket in the way we have placed before, and suggested that Mexico and Brazil might offer T&T alternative LNG export markets. With the &expiration in 2007 of the Caribbean Basin Initiative, Manning wondered what was going to replace it. Perhaps referring to the moribund FTAA process, which T&T strongly supported, he noted that &we still do not have, he said, &a proper trading arrangement with the US. One specific proposal Manning mentioned would have the US allowing duty-free entry of products perhaps manufactured in other Caricom countries but packaged in T&T. (Note: This issue, which he has raised with us before, is due to be discussed at a Trade and Investment Council meeting between the US and CARICOM to be held in October.)

¶4. (U) Immediately following Manning,s speech, Ambassador

Austin denied any US neglect of the Caribbean and told the media that T&T continues to be a very important partner of the US. The Ambassador emphasized, however, that since there are many pressing problems around the world demanding the Administration's attention, the US Government must necessarily set priorities. He added that the Prime Minister has voiced similar criticisms to him and made requests for additional security assistance in the past. The Ambassador said he has always conveyed such criticisms and requests to Washington and will do so again, this time.

15. (U) Post received no advance warning of topic or tenor of the PM's speech. We have requested a copy of the speech as it was delivered, which we will immediately forward to the Department when received.

16. (C) COMMENT: With the next election scheduled to take place before the end of 2007, the Prime Minister's criticisms could reflect a decision to adopt a more political posture to help divert growing public frustration with the persistently high level of violent crime and its underlying causes. We feel that press coverage of the event overemphasized the aggressiveness of the PM's criticism. They also completely neglected the PM's comments on Petrocaribe, which are very much in line with those of the USG.

17. (C) COMMENT continued: Still, post strongly believes that Manning's allegation of US neglect of T&T is not sustained by the facts. Embassy Port of Spain, with active POL/INL, RSO, DEA, and LEGATT offices, has been implementing a comprehensive anti-crime and counter narcotics strategy that aims to assist the T&T law enforcement agencies with narcotics detection and interdiction, to assist the judiciary with the equipment necessary to successfully prosecute crimes in an increasingly complex environment, to train the financial sector in detecting and preventing money laundering and other financial crimes, and to provide youth with marketable skills and channel them into healthy pursuits rather than crime. We plan to pursue these themes over the next few days with the media and personally with the Prime Minister. One possible sign that the PM does not intend to signal a chill in relations is that we received just yesterday afternoon a positive response on his behalf to the Embassy's invitation to attend our 9/11 fifth anniversary ceremony. This is the first time ever that the PM has agreed to participate in this annual event on the Embassy's calendar. END COMMENT.

AUSTIN